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## INTERNATIONAL

## In Afghanistan, Soviets find replacing Islam with communism isn't easy

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The devout Afghan belief in Islam is proving a major obstacle to the Sovietization of Afghanistan.

Ninety-nine percent of Afghanistan's population is Muslim, and the Afghans practice their religion diligently. The element of atheism in communist doctrine has thus provoked instinctive hostility, and resisting Afghans rallied around the banner of Islam — the only belief system that unites Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and linguistic groups.

Even before the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Afghan government had tried to promote an acceptance of communist ideology among the Afghans, according to Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The regime of Nur Muhammad Taraki tried direct methods to spread its Marxist message through the mosques. However, the mullahs (religious leaders) usually refused to read the communist propaganda at prayers, and when they did, the congregation would walk out.

When the Soviets invaded, they switched to less direct tactics. Prof. Rasul Amin, former dean of social sciences at Kabul University, says that although they officially support Islam, the Soviets are in reality pursuing a policy of "de-Islamization".

Government-run Kabul Radio broadcasts proclaim that Islam and socialism are in reality the same thing, and that Afghans are free to practice their religion.

But government actions suggest otherwise. For instance, religious content in schoolbooks — traditionally a major element of education in any Islamic country — has been greatly reduced, and anything Islamic is regarded as antigovernment.

Afghans have become fearful of praying in mosques because of surveillance by undercover government agents, Afghan refugees say. Increasing numbers now pray only in their homes.

Under the guise of supporting Islam, the Soviets are also infiltrating the *ulema*

(college of Islamic religious scholars and clergy) to win control of it, Afghan refugees say. The Soviets seem to be aware of how much influence the mullahs and religious scholars have on the average Afghan. They have reportedly imprisoned or forced out anticommunist religious leaders and replaced them with a supreme council of *ulema*, considered to have close ties to the Afghan secret police.

To ease suspicions that communism will destroy the Islamic system, groups are invited to visit the Muslim Soviet Central Asian republics and, occasionally, Moscow. About four times a year delegations of 50 to 100 religious figures, accompanied by members of the Afghan secret police, take these tours. They are conducted by undercover agents of the Soviet secret police, Professor Amin says.

The visitors are taken to both functioning mosques and ones under renovation.

Abdul Majid Mangal, the former deputy to the Afghan ambassador to the Soviet Union, saw what he called "frameup prayer meetings" at a Moscow mosque. Some 150 Uzbeks and Tajiks had been imported from Central Asia, he said, to pray alongside the Afghans in the otherwise seldom-used mosque.

"The Soviets select the oldest and poorest mullahs from rural areas to go, to impress them with the Soviet standard of living," says a Peshawar University professor who studies the Afghan situation. "They don't understand that all of it is being arranged for them."

In addition to *ulema* groups, many other Afghan delegations are invited to the Soviet Union every year to witness firsthand the virtues of the Soviet system.

Peasants visit Soviet collective farms, laborers view model factories, judges and lawyers meet their Soviet counterparts, Afghan Communist Party and youth league members meet their parent organizations, and sports teams play matches. One hundred tribal elders are sent each year, according to Abdul Tawab Hikmat, a recent defector from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, a few hundred of the most in-

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dustrious workers are rewarded each year with vacations to Soviet bloc countries.

But apparently not all the Afghan visitors are taken in by these actions. A former Afghan government official who met many of the returnees said, "The ones interviewed in the Kabul airport after a trip proclaim for TV that yes, Soviet Muslims are allowed to pray. However, others secretly admitted to me that they had concluded that the Soviet government is against Islam."